

The Goodwill Options Program

Goodwill of North Florida, Inc.
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Program Overview

In 1994, a coalition of some 30 local organizations, including Goodwill Industries, was formed to better address the problems of homeless persons in Jacksonville, Florida. Known as the Emergency Services and Homeless Coalition, its members represent a wide range of agencies and individuals—including homeless shelters, support service providers, temporary employment organizations, businesses, and formerly homeless people. Early on, coalition members agreed that a comprehensive employment program was a critical unmet need for homeless clients. As a long-time provider of employment services in North Florida, Goodwill Industries took up the challenge of developing a jobs program geared specifically to homeless persons.

The Options Program is now entering its third year of operation. For its first two years, the primary funding source was a Supportive Housing Program grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Options staff includes a full-time program manager (Valerie Baham) and nine full-time employment specialists. Program oversight is provided by Goodwill's Vice President for Job Training and Development (Jim Wadsworth) and a Coalition support services subcommittee. In 1998, more than 1,500 people were referred to the program, and 500 formerly homeless people were able to secure employment.

The goal of the Options Program is to “provide easily accessible, individualized employment services to homeless people in Jacksonville.” Thus, by definition, the program does not target a particular group of homeless individuals, but rather serves a broad range, including substance abusers, mentally ill persons, and single mothers with children.

The Options Program offers the following services:

- ! Individualized assessment and job search support provided *on-site* at homeless shelters and other residential and outreach facilities. Employment counselors, working at facilities around Jacksonville, provide assessment services, assist clients in developing individual employment plans, and then monitor their progress in achieving their employment goals. Employment counselors may refer clients for training or other services or, if they are job-ready, assist them directly with the job search.
- ! Intensive job coaching for individuals requiring such assistance, particularly those with psychiatric illnesses. These services are provided through a Goodwill partner, Renaissance Center Inc. (RCI).
- ! Training activities that orient newcomers, connect potential employees and businesses, and teach employment skills. On a quarterly basis, Goodwill also holds a non-traditional job fair geared for the homeless population. Employers offer testimonials of their career paths, including the bumps along the road.
- ! Assistance in overcoming barriers to employment, such as transportation tokens; suitable clothing, tools, or necessary equipment for work; or day care.

Mission and Philosophy

Options is dedicated to the concept of “work first” or the “place and train model.” However, once that first job is obtained, the program is committed to ultimately helping client find jobs that pay better and fulfill career goals. In the words of Jim Wadsworth, Goodwill’s Vice-President for Job Training and Employment:

For someone to be self-sufficient, their most important need is to have a job. Often they don’t have the luxury of waiting three, six, or nine months to secure employment. They need a job now, if they’re going to feed themselves and their family and provide shelter for themselves and their family. . . .So our effort is to work with them to help find a job that’s appropriate to their needs and is consistent with their skill sets.

Once they have that job, then we and other providers can work with them to find other employment that will allow them to advance in career and advance in earnings. . .our role is not only to help them secure employment now, which is their most pressing need, but also to be there along with them and be there later to help them find that next job. That’s the reason we developed these other programs, so that there are steps that are available to the person, depending upon their needs and desires.

The Options Program is also built on the premise that employment services must be *easily accessible*. This is particularly important in a large city like Jacksonville that has a very limited public transportation system. By placing employment counselors at different residential sites, the counselors can readily interact with both clients and case managers. Clients also have the convenience of one-stop shopping. When they are ready to receive employment services, they simply have to go to another room and not another part of town.

Assessment and Counseling

Because the Options program operates in a variety of residential settings, individual Options staff must comply with different rules and requirements. The rule at most sites is that an individual must be actively involved in case management at their residential site and working toward meeting other needs before they are referred to an employment specialist. Referrals typically come from the residential case managers.

The services offered to Options clients are tailored to the needs of the individual—based upon their skills and aptitudes, their needs, and also their work history. During an initial meeting, the client and the employment specialist determine work-related needs, job skills and readiness, and work preferences. In follow-up meetings, the counselor works with the client to prepare ***an individual employment plan***. The plan addresses both short-term and long-term training and employment goals. The specialist also identifies specific job-related needs that a client may have, such as lack of transportation, clothing, or day care. Goodwill can supply bus tokens to newly hired clients; Goodwill can also provide vouchers that allow clients to obtain clothing at Goodwill Thrift Stores.

Over the next few days or weeks, the employment specialist works with the client to identify job leads. The counselors do not go on job interviews with the clients, who are expected to conduct their own job search under most circumstances. However, once a job is obtained, the Options staff provides follow-up services. At most sites, counselors follow the progress of newly employed clients for one year to ensure that everything is going well. If a problem arises, they will work with the client and employer to arrange a solution.

Valerie Baham notes the importance of follow-up services:

When an employment specialist starts working with an individual, it's really important to stick with that individual long-term. Along the way there are many rough times, not only for the participant, but for the employment specialist as well. . . .It's really important that we go the extra mile and stick with them until the end, whether they stick with themselves or not, because if we stick with them

and if they still fail, I think they still walk away with a sense of knowing that someone believed in them. . . .

Some clients, particularly those with psychiatric disabilities, require more intensive assistance. For these Options clients, the Renaissance Center Inc. (RCI) offers specialized services including *job coaching*. Heidi Davis, an RCI counselor, describes how this works:

The coaching process is really vital because getting the person that job, doing whatever's necessary to get them ready to go through the job interview, . . . is only the beginning. Helping that person to gain the confidence and the skills to stay on the job, this is our goal. We're looking at not a quick fix, but something that's going to be long-range and sustainable. . . .

That follow-up process is extremely important, and we will follow a client as long as they really need services. Some of our folks are ready to leave us after six months, and we have some clients that are still with us after two years, because they need that kind of support; but they stay on the job. They just need someone there that cares and that will listen and help them in the areas that they're deficient. I can't say enough for that part of it.

The intensive nature of job coaching is revealed in Heidi Davis' description of her work with one client who had been living at the I.M. Sulzbacher Center for the Homeless:

I guess one lady that comes to mind. . . we used to call her Mama because she was sort of everybody's mother. A lovely lady, but she is schizophrenic, and she left here and went to transitional housing, but was not able to cope with finding a job and going through all the processes that you have to go through to keep a job. So, what I did was help her to pick out a job that would be suitable for her. We found a job in a thrift store and I helped her to fill out the application, and went through the process of her turning in the application and going for the interview, and she was hired.

. . . She was very nervous about what she was supposed to do and how she was supposed to do it—so for a week I went with her to work every day, and we worked together until she felt secure about her job, and we also worked with her employer, so that they understood what her needs were. . . .

She's been employed now for seven months and is doing very well, has moved out to her own apartment, loves her job, and loves her boss.

It really takes a very personal relationship. When you're working with someone that has a mental barrier, you really have to build a trust relationship with that person and there has to be that level of security for them to know that you're not going to be halfway there; they need someone that's going to go the distance with them. So the kinds of things that we do are to be sure their needs are balanced; to be sure that the type of job that we are finding for them is going to be appropriate for them; that they can manage it; to be sure that the environment they work in is going to be worker-friendly; to help prepare their employers for their presence, and set up good communication lines.

Program Management

As previously described, Options partners with many different providers spread out over a large geographic area. (A list of residential sites serviced by Options is shown on the next page.) Managing such a dispersed program can have its special challenges. The program staff work hard to ensure that everyone's needs are met.

Because Options works with different organizations that serve different populations—mentally disabled persons, single mothers with children, etc.—Valerie Baham and her staff tailor their services to each particular facility and to the people who reside there. They do this in several ways. Most important, in hiring an employment specialist for a given site, Ms. Baham looks for someone who she thinks can work effectively with a particular population that is served by the partner organization. Options will also involve the partner organization in screening candidates and in the final interview for the staff person.

Once the employment specialist is established at a site, Ms. Baham works to ensure that her staff and the facility staff, especially the case managers, are communicating often. Ms. Baham visits each site on a regular basis, at least once a week. If there are any problems or concerns, they can be quickly identified and addressed. She notes, however, that problems inevitably arise:

I think that sometimes it happens when you have the case manager for that site and an employment specialist, and you're both pulling and tugging on that client to go two different directions, and. . .that client is split down the middle and starts using one against the other. So, it's very important that we keep that open line of communication and make sure that we're offering—or at least saying—the same thing.

The residential sites also work to ensure open communications and a team spirit between their staff and the Options employment specialists. Linda Lanier, the Executive Director of

Sulzbacher Center, which is served by Options, describes how her site has worked to integrate two Options employment specialists into their program:

We have found that partnering with outside agencies, and in fact even having them under our roof, has for the most part been very successful. It's important to remember we're all human beings, and relationships don't always work out as perfectly as we would like them to. But one of the things we've done is, we have client-specific teams—in other words, we have a team for our women's dorm, our men's dorm, our family dorms, and our men's pavilion. So there's a cross-department professional team who works with [each group] of residents.

So, we invite our resource partners, like Goodwill, to participate in those teams. They carry every bit as much clout and responsibility as every member of the team who gets a paycheck from the shelter. So, we really make them partners in the care of our guests, and I think that has probably been the single-most thing that has contributed to the success, because they don't feel like they're just somebody who rents an office or stays in an office. They really feel part of the shelter, and that's been very important.

Housing Provider Partners Working with the Options Program

Options works with a wide range of homeless residential facilities that serve different homeless populations:

The LM. Sulzbacher Center is an emergency shelter. It is the largest facility in Jacksonville, serving several hundred people at a time. Two Options employment specialists work in concert with the case managers to assist people to become self-sufficient.

Liberty Center is a transitional housing facility for men and women. Options works with individuals at Liberty Center to either find employment or to advance in their career if they already have a job.

The **YWCA** also runs a transitional housing facility for women and children. Residents can stay there for up to two years. Because they pay rent, YMCA residents need to be employed. The Options employment specialist works with the clients to help them develop a long-term career plan and find employment that will meet their immediate needs.

Hubbard House is a residential facility for abused and battered women. Many of the women at Hubbard House have not worked outside the home for some time. They often need to work transitionally for a period before they are ready for full-time employment. The Options employment specialist works with these residents to help them find transitional employment. Having gained some work experience, Options works with them to find full-time permanent jobs.

Clara White Mission does not have a residential program. It is a walk-in, emergency assistance center. Meals are provided and some social services are available at this location. An Options employment specialist will make contact with people as they come off the street.

While building a team is important at each site, Valerie Baham also works to create a team spirit among her staff of employment specialists. She brings her staff together on a regular basis to discuss issues and share information.

Advantages of this Model

For the City of Jacksonville, the Options model is a cost-effective means of delivering employment services to homeless people. Goodwill brings its long-standing expertise to

homeless individuals at residential sites. The sites themselves do not need to create or develop their own expertise in this area. Ms. Lanier explains:

One of the reasons that we chose Goodwill is that they really are the experts in jobs and job training, and they've been doing this for years, so why not ask the people who really know how to do it, instead of trying to figure out how to do it ourselves?

In addition to bringing their experience to the sites, Goodwill also operates other employment programs that may be of benefit to Options clients. (On average, Goodwill places about 2,200 individuals in jobs each year. Of this group, about 500 come through the Options program.) For example, the agency operates several *Job Junction* sites around Jacksonville. These employment service centers are a source of job announcements and have trained employment specialists to help clients with resume preparation and job leads. While the Job Junction sites are open to anyone in search of a job, they were designed with the homeless population in mind. The sites provide telephones so that clients can contact an employer and have an employer return their call without identifying a homeless center. Computers are also available for preparing letters and resumes.

Another project run by Goodwill is called *HR Options*. This program provides customized recruitment and screening for employers; most of the positions available to participants through this particular program are higher paying jobs, starting typically at \$ 9.50 per hour. Some who are served by the Options program can eventually be referred to HR Options for placement with one of these employers.

Partnerships with Employers

Options staff work in a variety of ways to engage employers in the program. Some employment specialists spend a good part of each day on job development—making contact with employers to explain their services and the population they serve, and discussing how Options can work with the employer to meet their employment needs. Employers will also contact the program, having heard about it through another employer who had a good experience.

In all, staff maintain contact with more than 100 employers on a regular basis. At any point in time, there will be 800-plus job listings in a job bank that is available to employment specialists for placement opportunities.

Goodwill staff recognize that they must not only meet the needs of the prospective employee, but also the employer. Employers have to be satisfied. According to Jim Wadsworth, employers are usually satisfied because the Options staff does a lot of prescreening:

I think one of the advantages that an employer has in working with a job program like this one is that they're getting people who are prescreened. Our employment specialists have time to work with a person, determine what their desires are, what their needs are, what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, and can assess whether or not that person is appropriate for this job or that job, and, beyond that, for this employer or that employer. So, they can work to help provide a better match.

Overcoming Barriers to Work

Because the public transportation system in Jacksonville is limited, getting to and from work can present a major hurdle for a homeless person searching for employment. Options staff look to help clients find jobs on or near transportation routes. According to Jim Wadsworth, “. . . One of the goals we strive for is that 85-plus percent of the jobs that our job developers secure are on public transportation and are accessible to our participants.”

Options is also able to provide clients with discounted bus tokens so they can get to and from work. Working through the Jacksonville Transportation Authority, they purchased \$75,000 worth of tickets in 1999 at a 30 percent discount.

Some Options clients can also participate in the Good Wheels program, which assists individuals in getting a car. Clients must be employed at least 90 days, and must be living in a permanent dwelling. Goodwill offers up to \$2,000 toward the purchase of a car.

Options also helps clients overcome other employment hurdles. The program maintains a client assistance fund that can be used to purchase work-related items, such as carpenters' or chefs' tools. Upon receipt of these items, the client is typically asked to sign an agreement to stay on the job for 90 days. If successful, they are allowed to keep whatever tools and equipment were purchased through the program. All clients are eligible to receive clothing assistance. Participants are provided with clothing vouchers to be used at a Goodwill Thrift Store.

Fine-tuning the Program

During the first two years of operations, Options staff learned a lot about the things that worked in their program and what they could do better.

Jim Wadsworth describes working with *labor pools*:

One of the things we've found that really doesn't work successfully in helping people to move toward self-sufficiency is working with labor pools. We have

found that participants who use the labor pool and become co-dependent on labor pools, they will work for one or two days in the pool, take the cash that they're paid, and then lay off for two or three days until they need money and then they'll go back to the labor pool again. So, we have tried to not use labor pools as part of the employment process. We've also found that there are some that have taken advantage of people, and so we want to make sure that we avoid putting people in a position where they can be taken advantage of.

We will occasionally work with one or two selected labor pools to help someone to develop work experience. It'll be a transitional setting, where we will have them work typically with a labor pool that is working at one job site for a period of time. We want that person to work for two or three weeks to gain work experience, to work on their work aptitudes, work habits, and then move them into more permanent employment.

Valerie Baham describes Options' desire to help harder-to-serve clients:

In our last year's program, we encountered a high number of harder-to-serve individuals. What we did, we went back and looked at what areas we needed to strengthen within our program. So [in] the next program year we're looking at bringing on job coaches to have more hands-on [assistance to] increase retention rates. We're looking at other programs too. We have joined forces with the Learn to Read Network to get a person to the point of knowing how to read enough to put him in a classroom environment where he or she can pursue a GED or some type of vocational training. There are other areas that we're looking at. . .for the next program year, but as. . .we encounter new clients, we see a need to do different things that will assist a client and empower them to become self-sufficient. . . .

Similarly, Heidi Davis describes the challenges of working with harder-to-serve clients, but a little more specifically:

One of the gaps that I see is working with homeless people who have just come out of a prison setting. They have a double handicap; they've been out of the normal society setting and. . .they have the stigma of being a convict or having a prison record. They're also living in a setting that's not normal, and I think of one gentleman that I work with that had [spent] 27 years out of his 47 in prison, and we made a lot of progress, but in the end he went back to prison. It just broke my heart, but it was just really hard to find the places that would accept him, and the places that were really able to deal with where he was coming from. I don't think

he was a failure, I think we really failed him. So working with people who have prison records is one place I think there's a big gap.

Another place is working with people who have dual diagnoses, people that have mental illnesses, and drug or alcohol abuse problems. They have a very hard struggle, and it's hard to say which came first, the chicken or the egg, with their situation, but it really takes a courageous person and a person with a lot of inner strength to walk that path back to being part of community. . . . Trying to be their support person, not to become co-dependent with them, but to be an enabler for them is very, very difficult, and I'd say that's where we have probably our lowest rate of success. They get started, and then there's just not enough support . . . to see them through the process, and I see that as one of the places that we really are needing to do a lot more work in providing services.

What Is Success?

Jim Wadsworth defines success in terms of stages individual homeless persons reach in working towards self-sufficiency:

In terms of success for the people we serve, I think the success varies from individual to individual. For some individuals, getting that first job and keeping it for 60 days might be a measure of success. We don't see that as ultimate success, but it is a success for that person, and we see it as a success for our program.

The next step would be for them to get a job and keep it for 90 days or longer. We have found through experience that if a person stays on a job for 90 days, then they're more than likely going to stay there a year or longer. If they don't make it the first 90 days, then they're going to be back in the job market. That 90-day point is a very critical one. The next critical one is six months. But 90 percent of the people who make it 90 days make it six months. So 90 days is a critical juncture and for us success is seeing someone get at least to that 90-day mark.

Heidi Davis expresses a slightly different view of success:

Success really comes in varying degrees, because sometimes success is just helping a person one step down the road. Maybe we don't get to the point of employment, but maybe we help them solve one problem that will some day lead them in that direction. . . .

Success, to me, is when you have helped someone to find their niche, you've helped them to find something that they're capable of doing. . .that they are able to take care of their own basic needs, and are able to move out of a shelter and into housing of their own. . . .

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